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ABSTRACT

The most effective activity for teaching communication research students the nature of the social science research process is to provide students with the opportunity to conduct an actual research study. Such an experience promotes and emphasizes active, rather than passive, learning; students finish the class with a strong understanding of the research process, the major concepts associated with it, and the importance of ethics in research. In order to integrate an actual research study into the course, it is necessary to plan and prepare certain aspects of the research process in advance. First, a complete description of the assignment as well as the research evaluation form used to critique the project was prepared in advance. Second, an initial design of the research questionnaire was prepared in advance because there would not have been time for students to do it during the course. Third, the procedure for selecting a representative sampling was prepared before the semester began. When the semester began, then, students were ready to conduct a pilot test and then plunge into the project itself, which focused on the campus radio station at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire; its main methodology was a survey via telephone. Such a project functions as an excellent example for generating discussion concerning the numerous research terms and concepts addressed during the semester. Students are provided with the opportunity to apply the terms and concepts to training the student to deliver a survey. (Includes an appendix of research material.) (TB)

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Experiential Learning in the Communication Research Methods

Course: Doing Research to Understand Research

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the importance of doing research to understand research; it provides an example of how educators can integrate a research study as a learning experience into the undergraduate research course. Specifically, this paper uses, as an example, a research study conducted during the Fall 1993 in the Communication Research Methods course at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The topic of the research concerned the campus radio station, WUEC-FM. The research methodology of survey was employed; the investigative strategy of the telephone interview was used to gather data.

One must learn by doing the thing;
for though you think you know it,
you have no certainty, until you try.

Sophocles

The purpose of the undergraduate course, "Communication Research Methods," is to provide an introduction to the nature of the social scientific research process involved in investigating communication. This topic can be explored through lecture, discourse, in-class exercises, library exercises, guest speakers, videos, the integration of computer skills, and exams designed to promote critical and creative thinking. The most effective activity for teaching the nature of the social scientific research process, however, is to provide students with the opportunity to conduct an actual research study. Such an experience promotes and emphasizes active, rather than passive learning; students finish the class with a strong understanding of the research process, the major concepts associated with it, and the importance of ethics in research. As Berko (1993) explains, "undergraduates...especially freshmen and sophomores, may not really understand what...research studies entail. Since many people only learn by doing, it is often a good experience

for them to learn about research, its difficulties and foibles by...doing a simple [research study]" (p. 1).

The purpose of this paper is to provide educators with an example of how they can integrate an actual research study into the undergraduate communication research methods course. The example provided in this paper concerns a research study which was conducted by the students in an undergraduate Communication Research Methods course at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire during the Fall Semester 1993. The research study, which focused on the campus radio station, WUEC-FM, employed the methodology of survey; the investigative strategy of the telephone interview was used to gather data.

It is important to note that the example provided in this paper is only one of several research projects conducted by students in the research class during the past few years. Every year, a new research study is conducted in the class. During the Fall 1992 course, the students conducted a content-analysis of the front-page of five different newspapers in order to assess the amount of coverage allotted to character/competence/image issues vs. platform/political issues in the Presidential campaign (Sims and Giordano, 1992). Students in the Spring 1994 class are researching sources related to violence on television. They will write a review of literature concerning the topic; in addition, they will design a survey instrument. The actual survey

data will be gathered by the students in the Fall 1994 research class.

In order to provide educators with an example of how such a study can be integrated into the communication research methods course, first, this paper reviews some areas that should be considered related to planning the research study; second, the research study is discussed in terms of how it was addressed during class time within the semester. The paper concludes with some thoughts concerning the benefits of integrating an actual research study into the communication research methods course, as well as the importance and advantages of providing students with an individual experience rather than a group experience.

Planning the Research Study

In order to integrate an actual research study into one's course, it is necessary to plan and prepare certain aspects of the research process in advance. As the research study reviewed in this paper was to be conducted during the Fall Semester 1993, it was necessary to address the following aspects of the study before the semester began:

(1) Description of the Assignment: A complete description of the assignment as well as the Evaluation Form which would be used to critique the project was prepared in advance (See Appendix A). Briefly, the individual project required students to

conduct telephone surveys designed to research WUEC-FM, the campus radio station, calculate the results from their research, and then submit a Results Report (APA style) of the research study. The assignment required students to address the following information in their Results Report: methodology, results, and discussion.

It is important to note that instructors should carefully select the topic of research; topics which interest students can function to generate enthusiasm for the project. For example, the research study addressed in this paper concerned the student radio station; furthermore, it was made clear to the students that the administration and the management of the radio station intended to review the results of the study. The students were enthused about conducting research related to their radio station; they also were motivated to conduct rigorous research as they knew the results would be seriously reviewed.¹

(2) Survey Questionnaire Design: Although it would have been an excellent learning experience for the students to both design and administer the survey questionnaire, there simply would not have been enough time during the semester. Thus, an initial draft of the survey questionnaire was designed in advance; it was reviewed by six experts knowledgeable in survey and/or broadcast research. After the semester began, students were given a copy of the first draft of the survey; they were

instructed to practice delivery of the survey, review it for problematic areas, and then offer suggestions, if necessary, for minor changes in the survey. The students did offer some suggestions for minor changes, and they were addressed. Thus, the class did have the opportunity to offer some input into the design of the survey. They also were informed of the steps taken to establish measurement validity of the survey; that is, they were informed about the six experts who reviewed the survey. Thus, the term "content validity" (face and panel) was introduced to the class.

(3) Sample: In order to expedite the research process, the procedure for selecting a representative and random sample was designed before the semester began. The purpose of the research was to investigate the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of both community members and university students concerning the campus radio station; thus, it was necessary to calculate the ratio of community members to university students in order to determine the sample. Two sources for telephone numbers were used; one source was the community telephone book, and the other source was a stratified random list of student telephone numbers prepared by the university administration. The student sample was stratified according to class status (freshman, sophomore, etc.). A ratio reflective of the number of students in each class status was calculated, and subjects were selected accordingly. The

procedure for choosing a random sample also was determined in advance; clear instructions were provided for students (See Appendix B). Thus, when the terms "representative," "random," and "stratified" were reviewed in class lecture, it was possible to use the sample for their survey project as an example. The example was something with which they could relate; it was meaningful to them.

(4) Telephones: In order to lessen the financial burden of students, arrangements were made to ensure use of university telephones for the study. As a room with telephones for use by University Relations already existed, it simply was a matter of obtaining approval to use and reserve the room.

(5) Organization: Students were given a packet which contained a selected number of pages from the telephone book, a selected number of pages from the student telephone list, a telephone log to record the research process, 25 survey questionnaires, and a sheet of instructions (See Appendix B).

The Semester Research Project

Students were informed at the beginning of the semester about the research they would be conducting; as indicated previously, a complete description of the project was included in their course packet. The first major area that needed to be addressed during the beginning of the semester concerned

training the students to deliver the survey. Thus, for the first fifteen minutes of class during the first few weeks of the semester, students practiced delivering the survey. This exercise taught them the importance of interviewer training in relation to procedure validity and reliability.

After the class appeared to understand the importance of administering and delivering the survey in a consistent manner, they were instructed to begin a "pilot test." A specified period of time was identified, and the students conducted the pilot test. The pilot test provided an example of the steps that researchers can undertake in order to reduce measurement error and increase the reliability of a study.

Following the pilot test, the actual research study began. Beginning and ending dates for the study were made clear to the students as well as the approved times for delivering the survey via the telephone. During the designated research time period, a portion of class time was allocated to discussing the progress of the study. Students often would ask questions related to either the survey design or some of the answers they were receiving from the respondents; such questions revealed that the students were experiencing "discoveries" about the research process.

As the due date for the Results Report approached, questions arose concerning how to prepare the research report. Discussion

thus centered on both APA style and the type of information that is featured in the methods section (subjects, procedure, and data treatment), the results section, and the discussion section (importance of the results, problems and/or limitations, and suggestions for future research). It was at this point in the learning experience that students appeared to truly internalize their research studies. As they were required to describe the sample and procedure, calculate and report the results, and consider potential problems and/or limitations associated with their studies, they demonstrated a stronger understanding of the research process. They had learned by doing it; they thus were able to discuss the research process with some certainty and confidence.

Conclusion

Although the project of integrating an actual research study into the communication research methods course requires the instructor to visualize, plan and carefully organize in advance of the class, the outcome of the experience can be extremely rewarding and beneficial for both the students and the instructor. The project functions as an excellent example for generating discussion concerning the numerous research terms and concepts addressed during the semester; students are provided with the opportunity to apply the terms and concepts to

their individual projects.

Most certainly, instructors might prefer to organize group research projects in order to facilitate the evaluation stage; however, it is the individual experience that truly provides the student with a more in-depth understanding of the entire research process. The group experience can be valuable and can stimulate learning but often students only focus on one part of the process of research instead of the entire process. As Stack and Hickson (1991) make clear,

although it is tempting to put students into research teams, the [research] course should be conducted solo. The team approach typically ends up with students doing only what they enjoy. Hence, some students will become quite proficient at questionnaire design or other measures and not at entering and analyzing data. Others will thrive in the library doing the literature review and avoid any interaction with participants. Still others will sit in front of a computer terminal and become enmeshed with statistical analyses. To become a well-rounded researcher and to understand the research process, the student must tackle each part of the process (p.353).

Communication Research Methods is a challenging course to teach. Usually, when students begin the course, they have little knowledge of the nature and language of the research culture. A

lot of information is presented and discussed. It is through the research project that students truly begin to understand and comprehend the course concepts and the language of the research culture. It is the process of applying both the concepts and the language through "doing" which creates such understanding.

Notes

1

Following completion of the course, the instructor checked the results calculated by each student and then compiled all of the results into a final report for the radio station and the administration.

References

- Berko, R. (1993, November). Integrating a research project into the nonverbal or interpersonal course. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami, Florida.
- Sims, J. and Giordano, J. (1993, Fall). Newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign: A content analysis of character/competence/image issues versus platform/political issues. Journal of Communication Studies. 12 (1).
- Stacks, D. and Hickson, M. (1991). The communication investigator: Teaching research methods to undergraduates. Communication Quarterly, 39, (4), 351-357.

Appendix A

Individual Project: WUEC-FM Research

Telephone Survey.....100 points (five points for
each completed survey)

Survey Results Report.....100 points

As indicated above, this individual project consists of two parts:

- A. Each student will conduct telephone surveys designed to research WUEC-FM, the campus radio station. This section of the project is worth 100 points. Each completed telephone survey is worth five points. Students who complete 20 telephone surveys will receive 100 points. On-campus telephones will be used.
- B. Each students will prepare a Survey Results Report, which will be submitted in the form of a written (typed; 6-10 pages) APA style document. See pages 85-89 of Frey, L., Botan, C., Friedman, P., and Kreps, G. (1991) and your APA Manual for style guidelines. The Form used to evaluate the Survey Results Report is featured on the page following the description of this assignment. Please submit the Evaluation Form with your completed Report. The Survey Results Report should feature the following information:
 1. Title Page (section 1.06 APA); Be creative but clear!
 2. Methodology (section 1.09 APA)

Describe for the reader how the research was conducted. Identify the Methods section with the appropriate heading level; the following subsections of the Methods section also should be identified with the appropriate heading:

 - A. Subjects
 - B. Procedures
 - C. Data Treatment

3. Results (section 1.10 APA)
Provide a straightforward account of the findings. Do not interpret or discuss the findings in this section. Figures and/or tables may be featured, but please note Sections 3.59--3.82 of the APA Manual for proper style. (Figures and/or tables are referred to in the text of the Results section, but featured at the end of the Report). Identify the Results section with the appropriate heading.
4. Discussion (section 1.11 APA)
In this section, the author interprets the results reported in the preceding section. Address the following three areas:
 - a. The importance and utility of the results
 - b. Identify the problems and limitations of the study (See Chapter 15 FBFK)
 - c. Suggest new topics worth studying, new questions worth asking, and new procedures worth trying.
5. In addition, please address the following issues at some point in your Report:
 - a. Reliability
 - b. Validity
 - c. Ethical Considerations

This Evaluation Form should be submitted with your survey Results Report. Please write your name in the blank.

Evaluation Form for Individual Project:
WUEC-FM Survey Results Report (100 points)

Name: _____

1. Title page.....05%_____
2. Methods Section.....20%_____
 - Subjects
 - Procedures
 - Data Treatment
3. Results Section.....15%_____
 - Tables
 - Figures
4. Discussion Section.....15%_____
 - Importance/Utility of Results
 - Problems/Limitations
 - Suggestions for Future Research
5. Reliability Addressed in Report?.....05%_____
6. Validity Addressed in Report?.....05%_____
7. Ethical Considerations Addressed in Report?.....05%_____
8. Use of APA Style.....10%_____
9. Writing.....20%_____
 - Grammar/spelling/punctuation; appropriate use of language; sentence structure; transitions

Survey Results Report Total...../100pts

Completed Telephone Surveys.....X5=...../100pts

Total Points for Individual Project...../200pts

Appendix B

Selecting the Random Sample

1. Your goal is to submit 17 completed interviews from the community telephone list. You will be given a student telephone list (stratified random) at a later point with instructions. You will be required to complete three interviews from that list.
2. Adhere to the following instructions when selecting a telephone number from the community list:
 - a. For each new page, start with the third number in the first column (far left). Call each number after it until you successfully complete an interview. If you don't complete an interview from the first column of numbers, then begin at the top of the second column (middle). You should be able to complete an interview by the end of the second column. DO NOT select a number from the third column (far right) at this point. You will return to the third column at a later time.
 - b. Use the green telephone log to record your progress. Please make note of the page number of the telephone number to the left of "number dialed" column. Use the back of the green page to continue recording your progress. Additional forms will be distributed at a later point.
 - c. You may return to a page if you need to attempt a second or third try on a particular telephone number.
 - d. After you have completed one telephone call from each page, THEN return to the first page and begin with the first number at the top of the third column (far right). Follow the same procedure as above but select numbers ONLY from the third column this time. After you have completed a total of 17 interviews, you may stop the process.
 - e. If you lose your telephone pages, find another (1993-94) Altoona/Chippewa Falls/Eau Claire Area telephone book and pull out your assigned pages from it.
 - f. You may mark the telephone book pages if it will help you to keep track of your place. You will be required to submit the telephone pages with the telephone log and the completed surveys.
 - g. A specified number of completed survey telephone numbers will be called again for a reliability check. Please do not even think about falsifying data. Students who submit falsified data will not pass the class.

Other Instructions

1. Deliver the survey as instructed in class. Try to remain as consistent as possible in the administration and delivery of the survey.
2. If you reach someone whom you know, or they know you, continue with the survey. Make a note in the upper right hand corner of the survey of the "problem".
3. If you encounter any difficult situations, make a note in the upper right hand corner of the survey and plan to discuss it in class as soon as possible.
4. Please deliver the survey in a professional manner. Remember, you are serving as a public relations vehicle for WUEC-FM, the Communication and Journalism Department, this course in research methods, and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.
5. You may begin survey administration Tuesday evening September 28. We will designate Tuesday 9/28 and Wednesday evening 9/29 as the official pilot study test time. After that point, we will discuss any problems in class and adjust procedures/forms if necessary. If possible, we will use pilot study data, so please keep it organized.
6. Telephones are located in Schneider 203 and are reserved for our use during the following times:

9/28/93-10/2/93	Tuesday through Saturday 5:30pm-9:30pm
10/4/93-10/6/93	Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 5:30-9:30pm
10/8/93-11/06/93	Friday and Saturdays 5:30-9:30pm
7. Keep all of your work as organized as possible. Remember, you will be required to prepare a report regarding the nature of your individual research project, so you will have to be able to describe the how you implemented the method of survey.

WUEC 89.7 FM SURVEY Fall 1993

Phone Number: _____

Interviewer: _____

Subject # _____

HELLO, MY NAME IS _____ AND I'M CONDUCTING
SOME RESEARCH FOR A COURSE IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE. WE'RE NOT SELLING ANYTHING
AND WE'RE NOT ASKING YOUR NAME. WE'RE TALKING WITH PEOPLE 12
YEARS AND OLDER IN THE EAU CLAIRE AREA ABOUT WUEC-89.7 FM, THE
UNIVERSITY RADIO STATION. YOUR TELEPHONE NUMBER WAS GENERATED BY
MEANS OF A RANDOM PROCESS. THESE QUESTIONS WILL TAKE ABOUT FIVE
MINUTES; DO YOU HAVE TIME TO HELP ME OUT?

[If you are uncertain about the respondent's age, ask: "are you
12 years or older?"

If yes, continue with the survey. If no, ask to speak to someone
in the house who meets the requirements].

THANK YOU, FIRST, I MUST INFORM YOU THAT YOU MAY DISCONTINUE YOUR
PARTICIPATION IN THE SURVEY AT ANY TIME, IF YOU SO CHOOSE:

1. TO BEGIN, I DIALED, _____ --CORRECT?

2. IS THIS THE FIRST TIME YOU HAVE RESPONDED TO THIS
TELEPHONE SURVEY?

Yes _____ No _____

If NO, thank respondent and discontinue the survey.

3. HAVE YOU EVER LISTENED TO WUEC, 89.7FM, THE UNIVERSITY RADIO
STATION?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, continue with question number four.

If no, skip to question number six.

Subject # _____

4. WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO YOU PRIMARILY LISTEN TO ON WUEC?
(Do not aid memory of respondent)

(write in # of music)

1. Classical
2. Jazz
3. Progressive/Alternative
4. Heavy Metal
5. Cultural Diversity
6. Folk
7. Blues
8. Other (Please specify)

5. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RECEPTION OF WUEC?
(read the list)

_____ EXCELLENT
 _____ GOOD
 _____ SATISFACTORY
 _____ POOR

NOW, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT MUSIC
PROGRAMMING,...

6. WHAT TYPE OF MUSIC WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR BROADCAST ON
WUEC, THE UNIVERSITY RADIO STATION?

[Do not aid memory of respondent]

_____ (write in number of music)

7. IF YOU WERE TO CHOOSE A
SECOND TYPE OF MUSIC,
WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

(write in # of music)

8. IF YOU WERE TO CHOOSE
A THIRD TYPE OF MUSIC,
WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

(write in # of music)

1. Clas Rock
2. Soft Rock
3. Hard Rock
4. Rock Oldies
5. Prog/Alt
6. Heavy Metal
7. Grunge
8. Country
9. Folk
10. Reggae
11. Blues
12. R & Blues
13. Disco
14. Jazz
15. Opera
16. Classical
17. Big Band
18. Polka
19. Show Tunes
20. E-Z Listen
21. Rap
22. Top 40
23. Cultural Div
24. No Opinion
25. Other
(Specify)

NOW, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT OTHER TYPES OF PROGRAMMING...

9. IS THERE ANY TYPE OF NON-MUSIC PROGRAMMING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO HEAR BROADCAST ON THE UNIVERSITY RADIO STATION?

Yes _____ No _____

If Yes, continue with question number ten.
If No, skip to question number 13.

10. WHAT TYPE OF NON-MUSIC PROGRAMMING WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR BROADCAST ON WUEC? (do not read list)

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------|
| a. _____ | 1. National News |
| YOUR 1ST CHOICE? | 2. Local News |
| | 3. Talk Shows |
| | 4. Call-in Shows |
| | 5. Sports News |
| b. _____ | 6. Sports Play-by-play |
| YOUR 2ND CHOICE? | coverage |
| | 7. Public Affairs |
| | 8. No opinion |
| | 9. Other (Please |
| | specify _____) |

11. WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR SPORTS PROGRAMMING BROADCAST ON WUEC 89.7FM?

Yes _____ No _____

If no, skip to question number 13.

12. WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR WUEC BROADCAST PLAY-RY-PLAY COVERAGE OF UW-EAU CLAIRE SPORTING EVENTS?

Yes / _____ No _____

NOW, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU A FEW DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

13. I'M GOING TO READ A LIST OF EDUCATION LEVELS. WHEN I COME TO THE LAST FORMAL EDUCATION LEVEL YOU'VE COMPLETED, PLEASE STOP ME.

☐ GRADE SCHOOL OR LESS
☐ SOME HIGH SCHOOL
☐ HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE
☐ TECHNICAL SCHOOL
☐ COLLEGE
☐ SOME GRADUATE SCHOOL OR ADVANCED DEGREE

14. ARE YOU CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN ANY COURSES AT UWEC?

☐ Yes
 ☐ No

15. I'M GOING TO READ A LIST OF AGE GROUPS. WHEN I COME TO YOUR AGE GROUP, PLEASE STOP ME.

12-17 ☐
 31-45 ☐
 18-24 ☐
 46 and over ☐
 25-30 ☐

16. TO CONCLUDE, IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO SAY REGARDING THE PROGRAMMING OF WUEC 89.7FM?

17. THANK YOU FOR YOU TIME. YOUR ANSWERS WILL BE-A GREAT HELP IN OUR RESEARCH PROJECT.
(Interviewer, check the next one on your own).

Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female